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Killing of children not rare in America

August 19,2001

By Dan McCue
News staff writer

STUART - The shocking crime itself, let alone the motive, is inconceivable to most people, but Cheryl L. Meyer sees it differently.

"As horrific as this crime is, it's also very commonplace," said Meyer, a professor at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio. "Based on our research and on phone calls and e-mails I receive, these murders happen at least every third day in the United States, if not every other day."

Officials say Jennifer Cisowski told them she responded to voices she heard inside her head last Tuesday morning, repeatedly throwing her 8-month-old son onto a stone patio and then down a flight of stairs to "test her faith in God." The act killed her baby, Gideon Fusscas.

What was extraordinary to Meyer, an expert on mothers who kill their children, was the peculiar way religious faith figured in the tragedy.

"In almost all cases where a mother has killed their child or children, citing some kind of religious conviction, the stated reason for the action is that the victim or victims had become possessed by Satan," Meyer said.

Meyer began studying women's reproductive issues 10 years ago, but in the past four years has focused her research almost exclusively on mothers who kill their children.

"In the great majority of these kinds of cases, which are only a small percentage of these murders, the mothers believe that in killing the child they are ridding the Earth of someone who has become imbued with evil," Meyer said.

"From a distance, and without a familiarity with all the details of the case, this one was far different and will probably, in the long run, be the grounds for an insanity defense in a court of law." **About 200 annually**

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According to the U.S. Justice Department's Bureau of Crime Statistics, about 200 children are killed by their mothers each year in the United States.

Meyer and Michelle Oberman, a professor of law at DePaul University in Chicago, wrote *Mothers Who Kill Their Children: Understanding the Acts of Moms from Susan Smith to the "Prom Mom"* - a book published by New York University Press last Wednesday.

According to Meyer and Oberman, mothers who kill their children fit into five categories:

Mothers who kill through neglect.

Mothers who kill through abuse.

Mothers who commit neonaticide - the murder of a newborn.

Mothers who are assisted or coerced into killing their child.

Mothers who purposefully kill their child.

"There are some very important distinctions amongst mothers who kill their children - different routes they take to get to that point. Yet at the same time there is a profound commonality about this phenomena," Oberman said.

"Almost all of them seem to be, on some level, women's responses to motherhood."

Meyer said case study after case study suggests a child is most at risk of being killed by one of its parents before age 1 and that, more likely than not, the killer will be its mother.

"Most likely that's because at that age they are with their mothers more," Meyer said. "As children get older, the percentages begin to shift and we see more cases of fathers being the killers."

But if the Jennifer Cisowski case is easy to categorize, Meyer said it is atypical in more than just its quasi-religious sense: It's actually caught the public's attention.

"Most people barely note the hundreds of news stories that appear each year about mothers who kill their children," Meyer said.

"What makes stories like this one, as well as those about Andrea Yates and Susan Smith, noteworthy to the media and the public is that these women don't fall into the public's stereotype of someone who would kill their child," she continued. "These women are of the middle class and, like the majority of moms in the purposeful category, were described as devoted mothers.

"These particular cases grab our attention because

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they shock us." **The Houston drownings**

Investigators say Andrea Yates methodically drowned each of her five children in her Houston home more than a month ago and now faces capital murder charges.

After committing the murders, the 36-year-old mother summoned police to the home she shared with her husband.

"She led him in," said John Cannon, a spokesman for the Houston Police Department in an interview with the Houston Chronicle. "She said, 'I just killed my kids,' then led the officer to a back bedroom where four of the bodies were found on a bed."

Another officer found the body of the oldest child in the bathtub, Cannon said.

Meyer said Yates' crime is similar to a child murder of almost 40 years ago.

"That case occurred in Honolulu, Hawaii, in 1965," Meyer said. "Maggy Young drowned her five kids in a bathtub and, like Yates, placed them on a bed before the police arrived. She was later hospitalized, but within days hung herself." **Postpartum related**

Among the repercussions of the Yates case is that it has focused attention on postpartum-related illnesses.

It was about half a century ago that physicians began recognizing patterns in the depression that some women experienced after childbirth, Oberman said.

The seemingly unexplained crying, mood swings and irritability, or "baby blues" that about 70 percent of women experience after childbirth is not clinical depression and generally stops after two weeks, she said.

"For the vast majority of women, what we are talking about is a fleeting depression, lasting a matter of days as their hormones crash after childbirth," Oberman explained.

But about 10 to 20 percent of new mothers are diagnosed with postpartum depression. And one or two out of 1,000 will experience psychosis with that depression.

A part of that psychosis might include auditory hallucinations.

Women who have experienced postpartum depression have a 50 percent chance of developing it again with a subsequent birth, Oberman said, and those who endured severe symptoms might want to consider not having more children.

Yates was diagnosed with postpartum depression after the birth of her fourth child and received medication. The birth of her fifth child likely tipped the scale to being too much for her to cope with

the scale to being too much for her to cope with," Meyer said.

Meyer said the media and general public should be careful when they blame postpartum depression as a cause of these tragedies.

"This really is new territory," she said. "People - even the experts - don't understand the syndrome, and so there's not a lot of consistency in what you hear about it."

Meyer also said postpartum depression has become "disproportionately represented" in the public imagination when talk turns to one of these murders.

To illustrate, she explained how she and Oberman conducted their research.

"We started with 1,000 cases that occurred between 1990 and 1999, and of those found just 219 that we could follow up extensively," Meyer said. "In several cases, the trail simply ran dry.

"In some cases, the murderer was under 18, so court records were sealed. In others, a dead baby was found but the mother never located. We then divided the 219 cases we had left into the five categories I've described," she continued.

"Of the 79 cases classified as purposeful murders, only five could be definitively linked to postpartum depression - a very small percentage. So while it's great people are taking about this syndrome, there are other factors at work here, and we shouldn't lose sight of that."

Arlene Huysman, a clinical psychologist based in Miami and author of *A Mother's Tears: Understanding the Mood Swings That Follow Childbirth* (Seven Stories Press), is an outspoken critic of how the medical establishment has dealt with postpartum depression.

"One need only look at the number of suicides that occur among mothers in the first two years after childbirth to see there's something serious here that needs to be addressed," she said. "Yet doctors are still treating postpartum depression like it's the best-kept secret in the world."

Making it all the worse, Huysman said, is that women suffering from it, "think they are the only ones experiencing it and that because they feel ambivalence toward their newborns they are the worst mothers in the world."

Even the number of deaths in the Yates case was not unique. According to Meyer, about 10 percent of the women who killed their children between 1990 and 1999 killed more than one child.

One of those was Ophilia Yip, a Chinese immigrant who drove the family van off a pier into the Los Angeles harbor, killing herself and her four children in 1991.

Meyer points to it as another example of a case that received local coverage, but scant national attention.

Then, of course, there was Susan Smith, of Union, S.C. **The Susan Smith case**

Smith, who was embroiled in a bitter divorce in October 1994, had just received a letter from her boyfriend, Tom Findlay, breaking off a yearlong relationship.

Findlay, the son of the owner of Conso Products, the largest employer in Union, wrote to Smith, telling her, "You will, without a doubt, make some lucky man a great wife. But unfortunately, it won't be me."

Another passage began, "Susan, I could really fall for you. You have some endearing qualities about you, and I think that you are a terrific person. But like I have told you before, there are some things about you that aren't suited for me, and yes, I am speaking about your children."

Despondent, Smith drove along South Carolina's Highway 49 and followed the signs to John D. Long Lake.

As she sat behind the wheel of her 1990 burgundy Mazda Protg - parked on a boat ramp - Michael, her 3-year-old son, and 14-month-old Alex slept in the back seat.

Smith shifted the Mazda into neutral and felt the car begin to roll down the remaining length of the boat ramp. The car traveled a few yards before she stepped on the brake, pulled the hand brake, and stepped from the car.

She did not want to commit suicide. Smith later told authorities what she wanted was relief from the stresses and burdens that overwhelmed her.

She felt that her life was filled with loss and rejection, and that the responsibilities of being a single mother were overwhelming.

"One of the interesting conclusions of our research was that while men kill children for a variety of reasons - revenge, for instance - this feeling of being overwhelmed is what drives many, many women to it," Meyer said.

Smith released the emergency brake and closed the driver's door. Michael and Alex were strapped into their car seats.

As the car splashed into the lake, it bobbed on the surface while slowly filling with water.

Within minutes, both boys were dead.

"When we began to research the purposeful murder category, one of our biggest problems was coming up with a definition of insanity," Meyer said.

"Ultimately, we couldn't find one that wouldn't be challenged by somebody.

"Susan Smith, we know, had a history of mental illness, but it can and has been argued she was not mentally ill at the time of the killing."

Meyer said that feeling of being overwhelmed and alone was also the prime motivating factor in the cases of Melissa Drexler, the New Jersey "prom mom," who committed neonaticide, killing a child within 24 hours of its birth.

About one-third of the cases studied by Meyer and Oberman between 1990 and 1999 were neonaticide.

On June 6, 1997, Drexler gave birth to a baby boy at her senior prom in Aberdeen Township, N.J. She put the baby in a trash bag, which she threw in the bathroom garbage. Drexler then returned to the prom and rejoined her date.

A maintenance worker, tipped off to blood in the bathroom, discovered the dead infant. Drexler pleaded guilty to aggravated manslaughter.

Drexler was sentenced to 15 years in prison. With good behavior, she will be eligible for parole in less than three years. **Not Treasure Coast first**

The Jennifer Cisowski case is not the first of such tragedies on the Treasure Coast.

It was only last June that Tammy Huff, 28, was charged with murder and child abuse relating to the death of her 8-year-old son, Jose Torres, in their Hobe Sound mobile home.

Martin County authorities painted a picture of the boy's last hours, alleging his mother beat him so severely he defecated in his bed and threw up.

"The Medical Examiner's Office states in a 24-hour period, Jose Torres received a severe beating that caused his death by blunt trauma," an arrest affidavit stated.

Huff's boyfriend, Bradley Dial, 34, was also later charged in the boy's death.

Assistant State Attorney Bob Belanger has said the state will seek the death penalty for both Huff and Dial if a jury convicts them of first-degree murder when they go to trial next year.

In 1998, Kris Ann Haddad, 30, threw her 2-year-old son Stephen out of her moving car into the Interstate 95 median near Hobe Sound. Stephen suffered broken bones and has since been cared for by his grandparents.

Haddad's parents said shortly before Stephen was thrown onto the median, his mother had stopped taking her medication to control mood swings caused by manic depression.

She later attempted to hang herself in the Martin County jail.

"Suicide and suicidal urges are very common among mothers who kill their children," Meyer said. "In fact, a third of all these cases are actually murder-suicides.

"While the jail suicides do happen, many of them commit suicide before the murders are discovered and a lot of them set their houses on fire," she continued. "Either using the fire to kill their kids or to kill themselves after the children are already dead."

Haddad remains hospitalized.

Meyer recalled a similar case with a tragic outcome.

"In that case, a mother threw her baby onto the pavement, but the cars behind her all swerved out of the way from it," Meyer said. "Her response was to turn her own car around and run over the baby herself, killing it." **Strange statement**

Though Jennifer Cisowski told investigators she had no history of mental illness, Meyer said the little she's heard about the case suggests Cisowski is suffering from schizophrenia or some other psychosis.

"Of course, I don't know for certain, but based on my intuition I'd say that's what went on there," she said.

"Given the age of the victim, this woman was still well within the range where she could have been suffering from postpartum depression. At least, she's within the range that she can claim that at trial," the researcher said.

Meyer paused to consider Cisowski's statement shortly after the murder that if she believed strongly enough, God would heal her son.

"It really is a strange one," Meyer said. "It's just that in most of these kinds of murders, the goal is eradicating a perceived evil."

Authorities said Cisowski recently began attending services at a Bible-based, non-denominational church in Connecticut, but she had not officially joined and had said nothing to the pastor about hearing voices or that God was testing her faith.

Prosecutors are looking into the similarities between her case and that of another Connecticut mother, charged in June after she allegedly heard voices telling her to throw her child from a balcony.

Kristin Anderson, 29, who has a history of mental illness, reportedly jumped from a balcony twice and later stabbed and burned her son.

Meyer said that, although she can understand looking into a connection, she doesn't think one will

be found.

"There are just so many of these cases that a connection, in my opinion, is very unlikely," she said.

Fellow researcher Oberman, who is also an attorney, said she can't predict how successful an insanity defense would be in the Cisowski case.

"Generally speaking, the determination of insanity is the question of whether someone knows the difference between right and wrong and whether they knew that at the time of the murder," she said.

"But states vary widely on this. In Washington state, for instance, there's a very modest standard, something called the 'irresistible impulse standard.' In other states, it's incredibly difficult to have yourself declared insane. Jeffrey Dahmer ate people, and yet the state of Wisconsin would not deem him insane." **Cultures try to cope**

Meyer said that no matter how society tries to cope with the issue, there will always be mothers who kill their children.

"This is something that is as old as human society itself and is seen very different by different cultures," she said.

"In China, for instance, female children are abandoned all the time, because they are seen as less desirable than boys. The orphanages are full of them, and untold numbers of them have died as a result of abandonment.

"In England, thanks to the Infanticide Act of 1938, you can't be convicted of first-degree murder if the victim is less than 1 year old - an acknowledgment that women undergo tremendous hormonal and emotional changes during those first months of motherhood."

Despite the high profile of some recent cases, Meyer said people would be off-base if they assumed there's been a recent increase in the number of mothers who kill their children.

"The penalties do for these situations fluctuate from time to time and from place to place, but the numbers stay fairly constant," she said. "It's like abortion in that regard: It doesn't matter what you try to do, the numbers stay the same."

But that's not to say many of these murders can't be avoided, Meyer continued.

"A number of intervention programs that are out there have been successful in helping mothers deal with postpartum depression and the feelings that lead them to do this," she said.

"In that regard, Andrea Yates' case may well prove influential. You can't imagine how many calls I've received since then from people saying things like, 'I know my sister isn't doing well, but now I'm

concerned about her.'"

More than anything, Meyer thinks women need to be able to get help when they feel overwhelmed.

"We need to get out to grade schools, to junior and high schools and other gathering points in communities and talk about this issue and find ways to increase the amount of social support that's available. It really is an area where we need a lot more education and to realize we need to support each other."

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